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SUBJECT: RENEWED TENSION AT THAI HA PARISH

REF: HANOI 1007

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: After two months of relative quiet, tensions flared again briefly at the Thai Ha Catholic Redemptorist parish in Hanoi. According to parish priests, on November 15, local officials, accompanied by dozens of members of a local "citizen's brigade," demanded to speak with Thai Ha's Chief Priest, who refused. After an hour-long standoff, the officials and their intimidating supporters departed. While far tamer than the ransacking reported on dissident internet sites, the incident underscored continuing anxieties over the disputed property, as well as the local parishioners' determination to stand firm. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) In what appears to be a deliberately provocative move, the Deputy Chairmen of the Quang Tung Precinct People's Committee, local police, and a representative of the precinct's Vietnam Fatherland Front arrived at Thai Ha parish the evening of November 15 and demanded to meet with Chief Priest Matthew Vu Khoi Phung. According to Father Phung and other priests at the monastery, the officials were accompanied by dozens of members from a "citizen's brigade," which then attempted to force their way into the parish. Speaking with Poloff November 19, Father Phung recounted that he rejected the officials' demands to gain entry to the Gerardo Chapel for a "discussion" and requested that the officials return the following day during the daytime. Father Phung said he feared that parish priests would be unable to handle the crowd that was accompanying the officials. The officials threatened to call the police and bring Father Phung to the police station for a working session, but Phung chose not to comply and the officials did not follow through on their threat.

¶3. (SBU) At this point, parish priests began ringing the church bells in order to "call the faithful," Father Phung said. Dozens of parishioners approached the parish but were turned away by local police. After approximately an hour, the officials and the accompanying citizen's brigade departed. They have not returned. On November 18, MFA Spokesman Le Dung denied reports circulating on the internet that hundreds of pro-government thugs had ransacked the chapel. During a short tour of the area after speaking with Father Phung, Poloff saw no discernable damage to the monastery, chapel or surrounding area.

¶4. (SBU) Father Phung speculated that the recent incident may have been prompted by local officials' desire to reclaim land adjacent to the monastery where the parish built a small prayer chapel in 2007 with the tacit blessing of the State-Owned Enterprise landlord, but without direct government approval (reftel). MFA Spokesman Dung alluded to this when he said that "according to Hanoi City's relevant agencies, a number of Thai Ha parishioners illegally built a house in a plot occupied by the Cement, Transportation and Materials Company and Hanoi Electric Power Company." Father Phung said that local officials remain furious at the parish for the negative publicity over the past year and the very large and public prayer vigils.

Comment

15. (SBU) While claims of attacks against the parish circulating on the internet were clearly overblown, parish priests have reason to remain skittish. An earlier midnight attack by a hammer-wielding "citizen's brigade" on September 21 damaged statues around the chapel, as well as some of the chapel's doors while police reportedly stood around and did nothing. Tensions clearly remain high. The incident also demonstrates that while the government may have scored a tactical victory by building a park on the disputed property, local Catholics remain determined to protect their parish and priests.

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